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Published in:
Tourism Geographies

DOI:
[10.1080/14616688.2019.1674371](https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2019.1674371)

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Author accepted manuscript

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Tiberghien, G & Lennon, JJ 2022, 'Managing authenticity and performance in Gulag tourism, Kazakhstan', *Tourism Geographies*, vol. 24, no. 6-7, pp. 1219-1243. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2019.1674371>

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Managing Authenticity and Performance in Gulag Tourism, Kazakhstan

To date, there has been limited research concerning the methodology and approach to Gulag heritage and how it has been memorialised and commodified for tourism purposes. The recent cultural commodification of the Soviet past and the development of participatory visitor experiences at Gulag museums in Kazakhstan necessitate to advance understandings of the roles authenticity and performance play in the management of Gulag museum practices in the country. Using a qualitative case study research approach based on a combination of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders involved in the development of Gulag tourism including senior management of museums, museum guides, policy-makers, tourism operators, local NGOs and experts in Soviet Gulag heritage, direct observations and qualitative document analysis of two Gulag museums and sites in Kazakhstan, the commodification and management of Soviet Gulag heritage is explored. Results reveal that beyond objects on display and images regarded as interpretive illustrations that allow visitors to connect with the past and verify history, dioramas and staged performances re-enacting various elements of the Gulag life are used as immersive and emotional tools to accentuate the ‘dark’ atmosphere of the epoch and induce a more impactful and participatory visitor experience. The findings contribute to literature on authenticity and performance in Gulag tourism by examining the delicate question of the extent to which stakeholders involved in the management of the Gulag tragedy can offer meaningful visitor experiences that are historically accurate and protect the dignity of the victims while adapting to the dynamic roles of museums as heritage and education sites.

Keywords: Gulag tourism, authenticity, performance, ideology, interpretation, managerial practices, museum, heritage, tourism management, Kazakhstan.

Introduction

Russia, the Baltic States and Kazakhstan hold some of the most important Soviet penal institutions known as Gulags. Yet, Kazakhstan has little commemoration of the loss of life experienced under the Soviet period of rule and has a limited number of national museums or national monuments created by government to commemorate and manage such traumatic periods of history. Hence, Kazakhstan is particularly important in this regard offering such a concentration of Gulags and interpretation of evidence of this dark period of Soviet times.

This study seeks to advance understandings of the roles authenticity and performance play in the management of Gulag museum practices. The cultural commodification of the past and the increasing search for authentic experiences is inherently linked to how the past is constructed, interpreted and offered to visitors as part of a wider heritage narrative. Any evaluation of the past requires one to understand how these locations are used to convey selectivity of interpretation record (Wight & Lennon, 2007) in respect of contentious heritage. To date, there has been limited research concerning the commodification of Gulag heritage for tourism development. A number of studies (Tiberghien, Bremner, & Milne, 2017, 2018; Tiberghien & Xie, 2018) investigated stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity, but none specifically addressed the 'dark' tourism context as developed by Lennon and Foley (1996, 2000). Authenticity in the context of penal history museums was considered by several authors (Piché & Walby, 2010; Walby & Piché, 2011, 2015) but none considered a multiple stakeholder perspective in the Kazakhstani context.

This exploratory research project investigates questions of authenticity and performance in Kazakhstani Gulag museums through the lenses of museum curators and guides, policymakers, tourism operators, local NGOs and experts in Soviet prison

heritage. The Kazakhstani Gulag museums, commodified, interpreted and celebrated for tourism purposes, create the context to investigate:

How do perceptions of authenticity of key stakeholders (ie museum curators and guides, policymakers and tourism operators) contribute to informing the characteristics of Gulag tourism experiences?

What role does performance play in stakeholders' perception of authenticity of Gulag tourism experiences?

What are the managerial implications related to the development of authentic Gulag museum practices?

Using a qualitative case study approach, the findings detail the various means used by the museums that allow visitors to connect with the past and verify history including the role of performances re-enacting various elements of the Gulag life as immersive and emotional tools and participatory visitor experience at Gulag heritage sites. The discussion then highlights how the study contributes to literature on authenticity and performance in Gulag tourism by examining the relationship between meaningful visitor experiences, historical accuracy and dynamic roles of museums as heritage and education sites.

Authenticity and the Visitor Experience at Penal History Museums

A number of authors have investigated destinations and stakeholders involved in the management of dark heritage sites (Frew, 2012; Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1996; Wight, 2006; Wight & Lennon, 2007). Interpretative exhibitory techniques have been considered in the context of manipulation and commodification of heritage for tourism purposes. Some of the narratives have been created at the cost of historical authenticity, a practice that can be found across sites ranging from Auschwitz to the 'Killing Fields' sites of Cambodia (Hughes, 2008; Lennon, 2009; Lennon & Foley, 2000). Throughout

the post-Soviet region, Slade (2017) and Trochev (2018) noted that the memorialising of the Gulag is a highly disputed and politicised issue.

As agents of conservation and cultural tourism institutions, museums are providing an increasing level of authentic experiences (Chhabra, 2008; Lennon & Graham, 2001). In Chhabra's study (2008), the museum role is defined between the management of artefacts and the provision of a variety of learning, participatory and entertaining experiences. As a complex interplay among objects, images and space, the museum creates a form of interaction or pedagogical experience between the collections displayed in the museum and the visitors (Casey, 2003; Welch, 2013; Williams, 2007). It is accepted that museum curators can be influenced by the dominant political ideology and display of objects, artefacts and narratives to reinforce and legitimise the political context (Pearce, 1992). They play a role in both the curation of the past but also experiences with visitors perceived as 'authentic' (Chhabra, 2008; Pearce, 1992; Prentice, 2007; Stephen, 2001).

Penal tourism has been explored across a number of research contexts (Brown, 2009; Strange & Kempa, 2003; Walby & Piché, 2011; Wilson, 2004). The cultural representation of prisons has been the subject of numerous studies (Walby & Piché, 2011, 2015). Creating a sense of authenticity for the visitor in museums hosted in original penal sites was analysed by Walby and Piché (2015) who identified four types of authenticity; ("architectural and spatial", "tactile and visual", "existential" and "narrative") in penal history museums in Canada. In the *architectural and spatial authenticity*, visitors are mostly claiming authenticity of carceral facilities with regard to their architecture and built spaces where 'the aesthetics of the space have been preserved despite the lack of access to the context of confinement' (Walby & Piché, 2015, p. 238). They then define *tactile and visual authenticity* that involves

incorporating or importing objects that tourists can see, with a projection of meaning of such objects via the relics onto tourists. Replicas of prisoners' memorabilia not original to the sites are often displayed, specifically for tourists, to convey a sense of authenticity. A third type of authenticity, *existential authenticity*, constitutes a postmodern perspective on the concept involving a special state of living in which an individual is true to oneself (N. Wang, 1999). As a means to get a sense of what prison was or is currently like, existential authenticity staged in prison museums can allow tourists to stay in some prison cells and stage some moments of carceral life. Visitors are locked 'behind the bars', interact with devices that were once used to torture former inmates and may stay overnight, enabling a simulation of the 'pains of imprisonment' in the incarceration original context (Walby & Piché, 2011, 2015). A fourth type of authenticity, *narrative authenticity*, looks at using various narratives and signs in records that documented carceral life, but can also include 'elaborated re-enactment scenes of prison life, conveyed in plays or performance art pieces at these sites that depict the historical conditions of confinement at the sites and the lives of the people who worked there' (Walby & Piché, 2015, p. 242).

Performative Authenticity and Tourism Experience at Dark Heritage Sites

MacCannell's (1973) theoretical development of staged authenticity, built upon Goffman's original work (1959) discusses how local communities' activities can be performed specifically for visitors as a 'packaged commodity' (Y. Wang, 2007). Knudsen and Waade (2010) and Zhu (2012) assert that tourists not only gaze but are also bodies performing at specific sights. By including a tactile body, movements, actions and emotions into the notion of performativity, visitors can authenticate places through their emotional connection to them. Therefore, 'performative authenticity is dependent on proximity and in between-ness' (Knudsen & Waade, 2010, p. 13) and can

apply, for example, in the human guidance to, and witnessing of, sights of difficult and undesirable heritage. An example would be dark tourism sites encountered in communism tours in Poland (Knudsen, 2010).

As a key factor of tourist satisfaction, Tiberghien, Bremner and Milne (2017) revealed that the performative aspects contributing to the perceived authenticity of the visitors' tourism experiences in Kazakhstan were spontaneous, existential and reciprocal in respect of the relationships with the local communities hosting them. However, Xie (2011) argues that tourist attractions market authenticity but may prevent tourists' assumed desire for genuine experiences as cultural performances tend to rely on caricature and stereotype. The structured aspects of tourism events and lack of intimacy between visitors and performers (Conran, 2006) create a larger temporal distance. The access to 'authentic' cultural heritage consequently remains hidden to the gaze of visitors.

As means to raise revenues or enhance the appeal of dark heritage sites, some penal history museums display curated performances to represent the experience of imprisonment as means to engage visitors with the tragedy. This is done despite the difficulty of conveying narratives of the place and understanding the many layers of untold stories inaccessible for many visitors. As tourists might well be educated about imprisonment and punishment through such cultural representations (Brown, 2009), the variation in management, scale and staff ability merits consideration. In the Gulag heritage context, the challenge is the difficulties of representing human suffering in a sensitive and meaningful way and the challenge of historical integrity.

Gulag Tourism and Kazakhstan Heritage Tourism Development

The development of heritage tourism in Kazakhstan is a relatively new phenomenon (Tiberghien, Garkavenko, & Milne, 2015). Since the end of the Soviet period and

Kazakhstan independence in 1991, the country was led by the autocratic president Nursultan Nazarbayev who ruled until March 2019 before handing power to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The country's economic shift to a market-economy and the modernization of Kazakhstani lifestyles has led to international tourism development and an increase in the number of visitor arrivals, with visitors primarily looking for Silk Road, adventure and extreme tours (Werner, 2003). The country attracted more than 4.5 million international tourist arrivals in 2017 (World Economic Forum, 2017). Tourism suppliers now capitalise on the dynamic nature of Kazakhstan's cultural heritage and the potential of new niche tourism experiences including nomadic home-stays (Tiberghien, 2018), 'shopping tours' from the former capital Almaty (Garkavenko & Tiberghien, 2015), space tourism at the Baikonur Cosmodrome and dark tourism based on the Stalin-era camps in Central Kazakhstan (Sarmiento & Serikboluly, 2014).

Gulags and Gulag Tourism

The Gulags, a bureaucratic acronym standing for Main Administration of Camps of the Soviet Union were a means to organise and demonstrate the superiority of the socialist penal system. Some of the main purposes of the Gulags were to re-educate people and to portray the socialism of the Soviet Union in the 1950s as a superior and humane alternative to the capitalist correctional facilities' (Hardy, 2012b; Salmon, 2006). As a major instrument of political repression, terror and control in the Soviet Union, estimates indicate that some eighteen million people passed through the Gulags and another six million were sent to exile and deported to the Kazakh deserts or the Siberian forests between 1929 up until the death of Stalin in 1953 (Applebaum, 2003). Historians estimate the death toll for the Gulag of at least 6 million from the archival record on prisoners' physical labor capability and that a minimum figure of 1.5 to 1.7 million

prisoners died at the result of their detention between 1930 to 1953 (Alexopoulos, 2017).

Over 1.3 million people were deported to Kazakhstan from various parts of the Soviet Union including, including Koreans, Poles, Ukrainians, Chechens and Crimean Tatars among others, in addition to 100,000 residents of Soviet Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan was the location of some of the largest camps in the Gulag system such as Karlag and Steplag. The Gulag was both a concentration camp and a penal system, and corrective labour involved a combination of economic output (extracting rich deposits of natural resources) with human transformation. The Gulag served as an institution that would define the capabilities of a prisoner to return to society (Barnes, 2011).

During the Stalin era, the Gulags were used as an instrument of promotion and propaganda with foreigners invited to visit. The NKVD officials (People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs of the Soviet Union) staged imprisonment and living conditions of inmates to make them appear as exemplary and 'typical places of confinement'. After 1953, visits to the Gulags were strictly monitored, planned and approved only for selected foreign delegations, perceived as 'friendly' to the Soviet Union, with visitors accompanied by high-ranking Gulag officials. But the vast majority of the Gulag remained closed to the public. Gulag tours were 'heavily scripted, tailored to the nationality of the guests and conversations were designed to invite comparisons with Western prisons' (Hardy, 2012b, p. 17), or exchanging practical concerns of governance. For some approved camps, a typical tour encompassed visiting the cells with prisoners and other premises (such as prison workshops). On request visitors could be given free time to view barracks without surveillance, photography even being allowed (Leibowitz, 1959). From 1956 onward, visitors were encouraged to talk to prisoners (though they were briefed by Gulag officials beforehand) following tours, and

occasionally, post-tour meals included gifts for guests. All were intended to give a good impression and initiate positive comparisons with their home institutions. The policy was reviewed in the late 1950s and the “camp is not a resort” campaign (Hardy, 2012a) emphasised tighter control mechanisms against privileges of the inmate population to attempt to restore the Gulag to its formerly more repressive state. For Solzhenitsyn (2003), this version of the Gulag offers a much more accurate picture of the abuses and atrocities endured by inmates at the Gulags and Soviet camps than the ‘show prisons’ displayed to visitors.

Research Locations

Outside Russia, Kazakhstan, as one of the major industrial and agricultural lands of the former Soviet Union to exploit holds some of the biggest Gulag sites of any former Soviet republic. The region of Karaganda in central Kazakhstan occupies a special place in the history of repression, where the Kazakhstani part of the Gulag heritage is presented in Karlag and Alzhir museum sites, the two largest museums dedicated to the victims of Stalinism located on the sites of the former labour camps. Despite their historical importance, the museums welcome a relatively small number of visitors (see Table 1 below).

Categories of visitors		2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
Visitors Alzhir museum	International	731	663	660	670	1433
	Kazakhstani	18671	18800	19001	20577	26917
TOTAL		19402	19463	19661	21247	28350
Visitors Karlag museum	International	603	1132	1164	682	1316
	Kazakhstani	14119	22634	23291	22125	26248
TOTAL		14722	23766	24455	22807	27564

Table 1: Annual number of visitors per museum (Source: compiled from Alzhir and Karlag museums).

Alzhir Museum and Site

The Soviet forced labor camp 'Alzhir' in Akmola village (Akmolinsk Camp for Wives of Traitors to the Motherland) is located 30km south of the capital Nur-Sultan. Alzhir was a special subdivision of the Karlag camp system, which held women arrested between 1937-1939. It housed more than 18 000 women from 62 nationalities and ethnic groups who were convicted and imprisoned for an average of 5-8 years on the grounds of being wives of traitors as "CHSIRs" - "members of families of traitors of motherland" (Alzhir Museum, 2018a). Brought essentially from Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, Armenia and Central Asia, the women prisoners of Alzhir camp were highly-educated and literate, and undertook a wide variety of economic tasks, including the construction and operation of a major textile factory that primarily produced clothing for the Red Army (Barnes, 2012).

Located some 500 meters from the former location of Alzhir's barracks in the 3 hectare field that once held an apple orchard planted by the women prisoners, the Alzhir' museum-memorial complex of victims of political repressions and totalitarianism was opened in Akmola village by the President Nursultan Nazarbayev on May 31, 2007, the national day of remembrance of victims of political repressions. As a means to reconstitute the atmosphere and 'usual way of life' in Alzhir, a reconstruction of prisoner barracks was created to illustrate the harsh conditions with mannequins featuring a vignette of the withdrawal of children from the prisoners of the camp. A train carriage depicted by Alzhir museum (2018a) as coming from the Stalin era that was once used for the transportation of up to 70 prisoners is positioned at the entrance of the museum premises.

The museum comprises two storeys; on the first floor the history of Kazakhstan from the Russian Empire to the Soviet era is presented in a circular museum hall. It

includes documentation related to the establishment of Soviet power in Kazakhstan, the collectivization and starvation of the early 1930s. The political event of December 1986 during which a demonstration to protest Moscow's decision to replace Kazakhstan's long-time Communist Party leader is also pictured in the hall. The history, development and a description of the labor camp system as a state apparatus between the 1930-50s, as well as its political, administrative and economic role, are additionally presented. Various stories of important political and historical figures, poets and writers who were repressed during the times of the Gulags are documented with photographs and copies of personal files, interrogation and crime documentation. A series of portraits of famous women who were incarcerated in Alzhir detail the life of some of the prisoners and what their lives became after their incarceration in the camp.

The second floor of the museum, the “Alzhir” hall is dedicated to the camp life in Akmola village. Collections include letters from former Alzhir prisoners, artwork, interviews, newspaper, photo- and video-materials on repressions, dioramas depicting interrogation protocols, memoirs of former prisoners as well as documentary films. The Alzhir museum is aiming at attracting ‘the younger generation’ as part of their educational tourism strategy and signed a memorandum of cooperation with various schools (children from 6 to 17 y.o). In addition to ceremonies held on 31st of May, the senior management team of the museum organises a number of re-enactment events of the Gulag life held at Alzhir museum premises to convey ‘a sense of belonging and compassion and expand the knowledge about the Kazakhstani Gulag heritage (Alzhir Museum, 2018b).

Karlag Museum and Site

Karlag (i.e. Karaganda Corrective Labor Camp of The People’s Commissariat of Internal Affairs – the NKVD) refers to one of the hundred camps named as a Gulag and

organised by Josef Stalin in the period of mass political repressions between 1929 and 1953. The operator Nomadic travel Kazakhstan (2018) which organises visits to Gulag museums and sites refers to Karlag as standing out among other camps for its particular dimensions and geographical significance. Equally significant is its prisoner population, and the fact it is the longest-lasting camp in the Gulag system. Stretching 300 km north to south and 200 km east to west and encompassing a number of administrative buildings, camp subdivisions and sectors on its territory. In truth this Gulag was a region combining towns, production centres, prison accommodation and guard accommodation. The Gulag's administrative center was located in Dolinka village, 50 km to the southwest from Karaganda city, and controlled the slave labor of political prisoners who worked for the coal, metallurgy, agriculture, textiles and industries.

The Karlag museum (also named as “The Memory Museum of Victims of Political Repressions”) located 45 kilometres south west of the city of Karaganda is one of the largest Gulag-related museums in the former Soviet Union and is housed in the building of the former administrative centre of Karlag in Dolinka village. Encompassing around thirty halls and exhibitions on three floors, the Karlag museum mixes traditional displays of artefacts and experiential cultural museum practices (Barnes, 2013; Prentice, 2007). The first floor is dedicated to the deportations during the Soviet era, including the early 1930s famine in Kazakhstan, the political repression of the Kazakh intelligentsia and artists, but also includes sections on various parts of the life at the Gulag including economic activity and the life of prisoners and children in Karlag. Artefacts, photographs and stories of the inmates are displayed in a rather traditional way behind glass cases and dioramas, detailing both the history of Soviet authoritarianism in general and the Karlag labour camp in particular. The Kazakh

independence from the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Kazakhstan as an independent state is presented on the second floor. This is a standard display in all Kazakhstani museums and is a non-critical and ebullient appraisal of the Kazakhstani Republic and its leader since 1990. The building was renovated in 2011 in a Soviet neoclassicism style, with dioramas depicting a range of aspects of the Gulag life including prisoner cells, interrogation rooms, torture chambers and replica execution rooms in the basement of the building.

Tours of Karlag are organised by operators on the Gulag premises and include visiting the museum and two mass grave sites including ‘Mamochkino’ where the remains of children were buried and ‘Spassk’ cemetery where the foreign prisoners of World War II were buried. Since 2013, the Karlag museum organises an annual ‘Night in Karlag’ event attended by 500-1,000 visitors which encompassed a night-time tour of the museum with museum staff staging dramatic scenes of the Gulag. Visitors are additionally offered to taste “Gulag-type meals”, and ‘volunteer’ prisoners are asked ‘not to sleep’ to mimic the supposed Gulag life conditions (RadioFreeEurope/Radio Liberty, 2013). In the room dedicated to the cultural life of the camps, the Karlag museum additionally organises musical performances for visitors staging the musical activities that were appropriate at the time of the Gulag.

Methodology

This research project follows a qualitative case study methodology and adopts an explorative/interpretive position to explore the commodification, interpretation and managerial aspects of Gulag museums and sites in Kazakhstan. This methodology combined semi-structured interviews, direct observations of the museums and sites and qualitative document analysis (textual analysis of books, guides, photographs, illustrations and publications) in the case study context. In regards to the different

epistemological and philosophical positions that have a stake in the conceptualisation of authenticity, the study adopted a constructivist paradigm as a more adequate position for uncovering the managerial aspects of the process of commodification of Kazakhstani Gulag heritage. Constructivism assumes contemporaneous multiple social realities rather than there being the one and only 'real reality'. As the proposed research focused on the social construction of meaning, the researcher adopted a constructivist/interpretive research position to interview various stakeholders. In this way, the researcher emphasised the significance of context in understanding various stakeholders' positions in the study. Because the analysis of the interviews is related to time, culture and context, and reflects both the participants' and the researcher's ways of thinking, data in this study was constructed through an ongoing interaction between researcher and participant.

Case studies

Yin (2009) suggests that a case study should be defined as an empirical inquiry that investigates a phenomenon within its real-life context and can provide valuable understandings of people, events, experiences and organisations in their social and historical context (Veal, 2006). Because the case study approach comprises an all-encompassing method, covering the logic of the design, data collection techniques, and specific approaches to data analysis, it is a comprehensive research strategy or framework of design (Dufour & Fortin, 1992; Platt, 1992). A case study approach may adopt several collection methods such as a combination of secondary data with surveys and/or interviews (Yin, 2003). The evidence from multiple cases is often considered more compelling than using a single case, and the overall study is therefore regarded as being more robust (Herriot & Firestone, 1983; Yin, 2009). More importantly, the analytic benefits from having two cases may be substantial (Yin, 2009, p. 61). Xiao and Smith

(2006) suggest that case study methodology is most often seen in research projects related to tourism development and often addresses themes or topics such as alternative forms of tourist experience as well as cultural-heritage tourism. The Karlag and Alzhir museums in Central Kazakhstan served as case studies through which to evaluate stakeholders' perceptions of authenticity and performance in Kazakhstani Gulag tourism practices. The cases studies (Figure 1) were chosen through purposive or judgmental sampling to select cases that were informative about Gulag tourism development in Kazakhstan. As the two largest Gulag museums located on the sites of the former labour camps, the Karlag and Alzhir museums represent key Gulag museums practice in terms of tourism content, tourism approaches and activities proposed to visitors yet involved different tourism stakeholders. The two case studies offered contrasting situations (research setting, number of stakeholders involved, structure and organisation of the museums) compared with those of a single case alone.

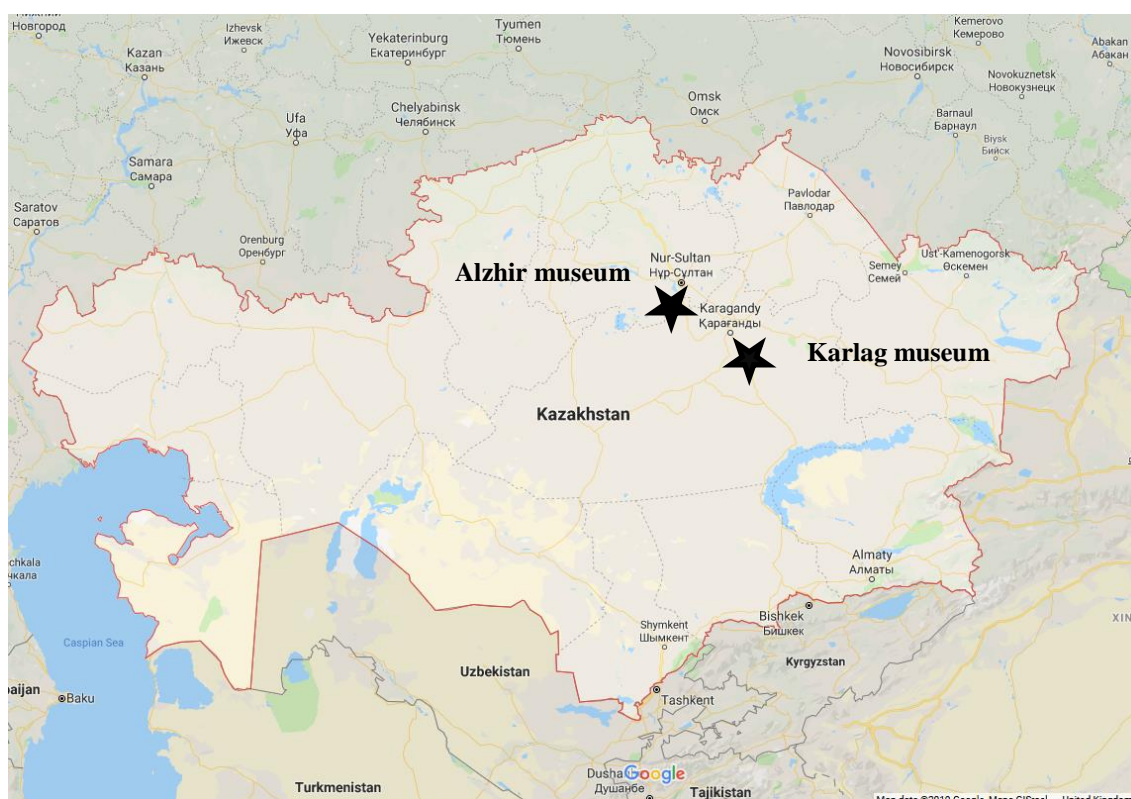


Figure 1: Location of Alzhir and Karlag Museums, Kazakhstan

(Source: Google Maps (2019))

Sample design, data collection and analysis

The study encompassed visitation and direct observations of the Karlag and Alzhir museums and sites, documentary research on the history of Gulags and semi-structured in-depth interviews using open-ended questions with various tourism stakeholders who were directly and indirectly involved with the development and operation of Gulag tourism in Kazakhstan. This information was used in parallel with an ongoing review of relevant literature and historical accounts of the case studies. The multi-stakeholder approach allowed the research team to interview different groups involved in the development adoptive of the museum. In order to understand the complexity of the Soviet and post-Soviet prison heritage in the country, a panel of historians and Kazakhstani experts selected on the basis of their publications, knowledge and expertise about the history of the Gulags and tourism development in Kazakhstan were also interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in July 2018 with stakeholders (detailed in Tables 2 and 3 below). The researcher needed the assistance of a Kazakhstani translator in order to switch from English to Russian and English to Kazakh when necessary. Interview questions, consent forms, participant information sheets were translated into Russian and Kazakh languages. The translator was trained for accuracy and reliability prior to fieldwork commencing. The researcher interviewed in English principally tour operators, museum guides and tour operators selling Gulag tours and in Kazakh and Russian the senior management of the museums, local officials and NGOs and specialists of the history of Kazakhstani Gulags. Interview transcripts in Russian and Kazakh languages were professionally translated into English by the translator. Some of the key questions included ‘the extent to which the Gulag museums

and sites reflected and portrayed accurately what happened at the Gulags during Soviet Union times; What were the roles of built heritage, memorabilia, visual imagery, narrative documentation and evidence and staged performances about the Gulag life in conveying authenticity at the Gulag museums as both heritage tourism, education and commemorative sites; What further managerial strategies could be employed to convey authenticity at Gulag museums and sites (such as special exhibitions and events, personal investment of guides and local communities).

Categories of tourism stakeholders	Number of semi-structured interviews Alzhir Museum	Number of semi-structured interviews Karlag Museum
Senior management of museums (museum directors and curators, archivists and architects of museums)	4	2
Museum guides	3	2
Tourism operators selling Gulag tours	2	2
Government officials	2	3
Local NGOs	1	1
Specialists of the Soviet Union and the history of the Gulags in Kazakhstan	1	1
Total tourism stakeholders	13	11

Table 2: Breakdown of stakeholders/interviewees contacted for the study.

Variable	Categories	Number	Frequency (Valid %)
Gender	Male	10	42
	Female	14	58
Age	20-30	2	8
	30-40	5	21
	40-50	7	29
	50-60	5	21
	>60 years	5	21
Employment status	Fulltime	18	76
	Student	1	4
	Homeworker	2	8
	Retired /Other	3	12

Table 3: Demographic profile of stakeholders.

The analysis of semi-structured interviews followed a content analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and a textual analysis methodology of documents,

books, photographs and illustrations from each museum. Boyatzis (1998) characterises thematic analysis as a flexible tool to use across different methods as it organizes and describes the data set in rich detail and interprets various aspects of the research topic. Themes or patterns within data were identified using an inductive approach as the themes identified were strongly linked to the data themselves. The analysis of themes involved a progression from description to interpretation, where the significance of the themes found and their broader meanings and implications were contrasted in relation to previous literature (Patton, 1990). Field notes, interview transcripts, and the concurrent integration of secondary interdisciplinary literature were used to develop and refine the emergent themes. More importantly, ‘the analytic benefits from having two cases may be substantial’ (Yin, 2009, p. 61). Since the cases are not sampling units but chosen for their ability to enrich the results about the variation of the perception of authenticity in Gulag museums, an analytical mode of generalisation across the two case studies was favoured. Following this approach, the researchers managed to draw cross-case patterns about various stakeholders’ perceptions of authenticity and interpretation of Gulag museums and sites and then contextualised the findings within the Kazakhstani tourism development. Finally, various dimensions of authenticity about the tourism experience at Gulag museums were compared and contrasted with the empirical material to ensure credibility.

Findings: Towards an Understanding of Gulag Authenticity

Architectural Fantasy and Remnants of Gulag Life on Museum Premises

An 18 meters “Arch of Sorrow” monument representing a woman grieving for her dead husband and lost children welcomes visitors on the Alzhir premises (Figure 2). To enter through is to pay tribute to the women and children who were incarcerated in the Gulag.

Made in a helmet shape symbolising male strength and female innocence and purity, the colours of the Arch evoke: accord and harmony between people, religions, and cultures of different ethnic groups as well as the ‘permanence of good and bad in life’ as opined by the architect of the museum. Designed in the shape of a truncated cone, the museum building has purposively no windows ‘as a means to make something secret being known’ (Alzhir Museum, 2018a).



Figure 2: The Alzhir museum (truncated cone in the back), the Arch of Sorrow and the train carriage from the Stalin era *(Source: Author).*

Alzhir museum was acknowledged by its senior management and guides as embedding a ‘special’ architecture, a certain ‘aura’ to disclose subtly the difficult stories of the Gulag era:

Visitors ask about the shape of the museum, why it is been done in that way. We tell them – there are no windows here except some light that falls on the artefacts and archived documents, so that ‘all secrets become clear’.

For some tour operators and experts in post-Soviet prison heritage, the museum simply builds on ‘monumentality’ rather than on ‘historical accuracy’, conveying a feeling of

‘spirituality’ and ‘eternity’ about the tragedy. Conversely, Karlag museum is perceived by a large majority of stakeholders interviewed as conveying an *architectural authenticity* as the museum is housed in the original administrative building of the Gulag camp in Dolinka. As the main guide of Karlag museum noted:

Originally the Karlag museum of political repression was intended to be located in Karaganda city but because it is the *original* administration building of the Gulag, the museum was established in Dolinka.

However, the Karlag museum is argued by tour operators as giving a partial/selective representation of the life at the Gulag during Soviet times. The scale of the operation and the many cemeteries surrounding the museum are largely missed during the visits:

It would be worth developing signage and interpretation boards with photos to show how the camp functioned during Soviet times. Because usually people just go to the Karlag museum, to the Mamochkino cemetery and Spassk and that’s all. There are still a few barracks that remain from that era, but local people are using them as houses.

For both the Karlag and Alzhir museums, the historical authenticity of the sites on which they are built was seen by a majority of stakeholders to be partially conveyed since cemeteries and mass graves associated with the sites were mentioned as ‘missing’ in portraying only a partial picture of the tragedy. The graveyard next to Zhalanash Lake where the victims of Alzhir museum were buried in Akmola village is not yet listed as a site of historical value by the government and therefore no special conservation work was undertaken. As a tour operator pointed out:

People who’ve been to Karlag often say the museum is better than Alzhir. But equally I believe Alzhir is a site of important significance in the Gulag because so many prisoners were buried there. There are no signage to the graveyard. I’ve

asked the museum staff ‘where is it?’ and they don’t know. I’ve asked the locals, they didn’t know where it was as well.

Similarly, most of the cemeteries and real places related to Karlag are not disclosed to the public, undermining the whole totality and authenticity of the visitor experience at the museum, as this tour operator detailed:

A number of tourists ask about the cemeteries and grave yards because the only one you visit during the Karlag tour is Mamoshkino cemetery but visitors ask where are buried the other prisoners? Most of the cemeteries and real places are not made public this day. This part of history is hidden because it’s not perceived as important at the moment, we have other things to worry about and focus on, not just the ‘dark past’.

Original artefacts as authentic repositories of the Gulag life

The senior management of Alzhir museum decided to portray a version of the tragedy using memorabilia that links the various populations who were victims of repression together: the ‘Alash’ movement; women, their husbands and children but also the people who suffered during the Soviet repression after the 1986 Almaty rebellion. Prisoner belongings, letters and clothes as well as an original cell door on the second floor. As the curator detailed:

All documents and photography of women imprisoned in Alzhir here are ‘authentic’. They give an opportunity to witness and to study with physical objects what really happened during the Gulag era.

Similarly, copies of official documents of prisoners presented on the first floor and several original cell doors in the basement of the Karlag museum were believed to represent important ‘authentic’ elements of the Gulag era. Such objects and memorabilia were seen as more effective in conveying the authenticity of the place than tour guides narration:

What is presented in Alzhir is mostly illustration of scenes about different periods of the women's lives in the camp. Here in Karlag it's presented more in-depth, you can see a number of halls detailing the life at the Gulag with statistical figures about the camp. I think it gives a deeper insight into the history of the place.

(Tour operator respondent)

As 'authentic repositories' of the Gulag life, the objects presented in the cells of the basement of the Karlag museum including bowls, spoons and prisoner mugshots. Whilst believed to be 'genuine artefacts from the Gulag times' they are then used and staged by tour guides to attempt to draw the visitor into 'a real Gulag world'. Yet their precise provenance is neither identified nor guaranteed.

Authenticity and Experiential Gulag Tourism Development

For some government officials and NGO coordinators, dioramas recreating scenes of the life at the Gulag work well as 'an introduction to the Gulag tragedy' but they also highlighted the need for credibility and historical accuracy. For some tour operators, interviewees and directors of the Karlag and Alzhir museums, dioramas depicting scenes of the life at the Gulag helped to convey emotions and provided historical immersion enabling visitors to empathize with what prisoners had to endure:

Dioramas are more effective you see them as you empathize with the prisoners, you can't leave these places indifferent ... emotionally (you) 'feel that time'.

(Tour operator respondent)

Several dioramas (Figure 3) were created to stage the life of the prisoners in the camps, including an investigatory room depicting interrogations and tortures imposed on the prisoners and a clothing factory room depicting a prisoner sewing clothes for the camp and uniforms during World War II.



Figure 3: Diorama depicting a prisoner being interrogated, Alzhir museum (*Source: Author*).

In the basement of Karlag museum, a range of rooms using mannequins in dioramas portray various elements of Gulag'. Radically contrasting with the halls and exhibitions dispatched on the first floor, the basement level of the Karlag museum is attempting to offer visitors a simulation. According to Kuznetsova (2016, as cited in Trochev, 2018), the deputy governor of the town deliberately insisted on installations in Karlag that were frightening, which was believed to be creating more attraction for tourists. Yet cells and interrogation and execution rooms were actually located in another (now demolished) building. As one of Karlag historians recorded:

The government authorities wanted to create a corridor with the motto: the scarier the better! The recreation of the dark atmosphere in the basement of the building is the first of its kind in Kazakhstan despite (the fact that) no prisoner was ever shot in this building. They deliberately wanted to develop more frightening tourism activities for visitors.

For the director of the Karlag museum, this was where visitors can 'better imagine' the times of the Gulag:

The basement of the museum where the recreated cells are made is very impressive. This is not only about giving information, it's about emotionally experiencing the place and attaching personal memories to what happened; for example the music is mimicking the heartbeat of prisoners before they were interrogated to render the 'atmosphere' of the place more realistic.

As a senior Karlag guide noted, when staging the performance of an orchestra at Karlag:

We aim at telling stories about what happened to these prisoners at Karlag, even if we do not have proof that it happened: for example that an orchestra was playing outside of the building above the torture room as a means to cover the screams made by the prisoners.

For this tour operator, other aspects were less convincing:

Dioramas and recreated cells do not work for me, it's not showing what really happened. I prefer real facts and historical data upon which the visitor can really make up their own judgements, whether they 'agree' with the Gulag system or not. Here they promote and 'push' the dark atmosphere using dramatic music and attract visitors specifically to the torture chambers. It's not sure torture happened specifically here, but they still present it. It is their interpretation of history.

The issue of staged authenticity is also evident in Alzhir and the subject of the following section.

Performative Authenticity and Staged Performances in Alzhir

Since May 2017, Alzhir museum has organised staged performances re-enacting Gulag life (Figure 4) during the 'Night at the Museum' event held on the 18th of May (Radio Azatyk, 2017). The event was conducted by museum staff, local military, school pupils as well as staff of the Akmola village cultural center. They aimed to recreate scenes from Alzhir camp. The performance encompassed the arrival of women at Akmola station, and the removal of children from the women prisoners.



Figure 4: Staged re-enactment of Gulag life in Alzhir museum (*Source: Author*).

As one of the museum guides detailed:

...So we recreated scenes of the life at the camp. The employees of the museum wore clothes from the Soviet times and they acted as the women who got arrested and brought to Ak-mola village sitting in the wagon. Guards were accompanied them to the camp. Then we performed the scenes in the camp when children are removed from their mothers by the camp guards in the barracks. I think that we managed to perform these roles because we work in this environment.

For some tour operators and government officials such staging of Gulag life was not considered problematic since it was not based on documentary evidence. However, the lead curator noted:

All employees of the museum are participating in the performance. We tried to show how the life of those imprisoned women was. They said that they know the way how it was - but in the performance they felt as it would be the reality: outcry of the women and children when they got taken from their mother. When tourists visit us we help them to feel the way of life of imprisoned women, what they were eating, what they were doing there.

For some such tableaux performances are questionable:

Perhaps it is very difficult to reconstruct or re-enact the whole atmosphere of the Gulags during Soviet times, and the performances should be made by professional actors, not by the staff of the museum as they are not trained specifically for this, for expressing such feelings. If your aim is to be as close as possible to history, then the performances need to be professionally rehearsed to be good enough.

(Tour operator respondent)

For some the need to showcase the most brutal aspects of the Gulag were important:

We also performed the same type of acting with a Kazakh theatre team that was witnessed by descendants and I asked them whether we need to portray this part of the Gulag life? They replied - "It is reality..." so I think we need to show this.

(Museum curator respondent)

The performance enabled the guide to 'vividly imagine' and immerse herself in that epoch:

All the scenes were costumed; it helped me to experience the spirit of that era to the full - with the details of that time (furniture, weapon, clothes, hairstyles, etc.). This theatrical stage conveyed the tragedy of what happened. I was filled with a feeling of pity for the fate of the children and mothers. I strongly imagined all this in reality - tears, pain and despair. I believe that such theatrical performances are needed, and not only once a year and in Alzhir museum. Because through such theatrical performances you can immerse yourself into this epoch, you empathize with those who suffered and who became the innocent victim of the Stalinist repressions.

(Alzhir guide respondent)

For both camp historians and government these experiences provided real visitor impact:

We need to organize this kind of events to attract tourists. To feel it, to experience this night - it is necessary. This is one of the good ways to attract tourists on this topic.

(Camp historian respondent)

Engaging visitors with the Gulag tragedy

Government officials and tour operators suggested the performances could positively involve local communities, visitors and pupils:

One way to move forward with staged performances would be to have local communities interact with the women when they are staging the part when they are brought and thrown into the barracks.

(Government official respondent)

Government officials were keen to advocate a more reciprocal mode of participation with the audience, as one of them explains:

Performances are very important. Nowadays, travelers not only want to look at spectacles, they also want to participate. In the case of Alzhir, you don't need to put everybody in prison, but involve visitors with some stories told during the performances, such as the one when women were sent *kurts* (local dairy products) to save some prisoners from starvation.

Such opportunities for interaction with staged performances is seen as a way to offer visitors, especially the local youth, a different way of engaging with the Gulag tragedy, as one tour operator details:

I think school children, when they're 10-12 years old, do not understand what it is all about, they don't even listen to the tour guide. But to watch the performance will be the way to engage them further with what happened during those terrible times.

This view is reinforced by a government official:

I think the information you receive at the museums during excursions gives a significant amount of information to children and international visitors. The participation at the performances also gives the opportunity for a deeper emotional understanding of what happened here. This mode of conveying information is more effective in immersing visitors deeply into the Gulag tragedy.

For many then participating in such performances would be a way to better understand, engage and sympathize with those who suffered from the Gulag.

Re-enactment and the Staging of Atrocity in Karlag

The senior management of Karlag museum and guides organise the ‘Night in Karlag’ events once a year on the 18th of May on the International day of Museums as ‘mini spectacles’ which they believe have an emotional impact on the visitors. About 500 visitors attend for the two hour event. This involves mock interrogation scenes and other staged elements of Gulag life. According to Karlag museum senior management:

When visitors enter the rooms, one guide of the museum talks about repression and an actor stands instead of the mannequin, so we can give the impression that the prisoner is alive. We are doing so because we believe visitors can keep these memories of the museum for a long time.

The background music complementing the information displayed was intended to:

...induce more emotions as visitors seem to immerse themselves deep into that time. We call these events “Excursion to Karlag”. These events are not only for children, they are for adults too who also want to experience it. They have heard about these times only from their parents but have never seen it by themselves. Getting information about the Gulags from documentaries is one thing, but when you see it in the museum and during this event – this is a totally different perception.

(Karlag museum senior management respondent)

The performance is differentiated from entertainment:

This event is different from a ‘show’; it’s an excursion during which we exhibit and revive our archive materials. Every year we try to choose a new topic and present new facts which are still little-known. This is kind of a reconstruction. That is why I say it’s not a show; it’s a reconstruction of past events when we are

dipping into the epoch of the Gulag.
(Karlag museum senior management respondent)

The extent to which perceptions by local communities participating in the ‘Night in Karlag’ event is influenced by such re-enactments was raised by some tour operators:

From a tour guide perspective, I can see why people would be interested in a ‘Night in Karlag’: because it is entertaining and something different. But from my own ethical personal views, I think it is wrong, because it is very disrespectful for the victims and the people who suffered at the time. Now it just becomes a theatre. It’s an interpretation of history in the wrong way.

The boundary between public ‘voyeuristic curiosity’ conveyed during immersive and recreated Gulag simulation and a more cognitive and intellectual interpretation of Gulag heritage through informative displays and image is important here. Remembering the past posited questions of dignity in regard to the information conveyed about the tragedy and the extent to which it resulted in some form of reconciliation sought by the senior management involved in the Karlag stewardship of the sites.

Discussion and Conclusions

Using a qualitative research approach, this study explored the managerial issues linked to the perception of authenticity and performance in Gulag tourism. The research first examined how various models and dimensions of authenticity applied to the Gulag tourism context. The research then provided new directions in which to comprehend the role of authenticity and performance in respect of Gulag museums as both heritage tourism and education sites. The study then poses the question about the extent to which historical re-enactment of atrocity can lead to meaningful Gulag tourism experiences.

Dimensions of authenticity and Gulag tourism experiences

In the context of Anne Frank's house, Penrose (2018) argues the museum deployed various combined mechanisms (objects, texts, photographs and videos) that enabled higher receptivity and embodied connections with the stories being told that encouraged experiences which visitors perceived as authentic. Beyond objects on display and images regarded as interpretive illustrations that allow visitors to connect with the past and verify history (Welch, 2013), visitors can be convinced by the overall authenticity of the place if prison museums are housed in the former prison site. For Alzhir museum, despite a *tactile and visual authenticity* (Walby & Piché, 2015) found in prisoner belongings, letters and clothes, the historical accuracy of the site on which the museum was built (the former orchard of the Gulag camp) can be debated as the remnants of the barracks that hosted inmates during the Soviet era have now all disappeared. For Karlag museum, tourism providers were primarily claiming authenticity with regard to the architecture and built space of the administrative building hosting the museum. This is a form of *architectural and spatial authenticity* defined by Walby and Piché (2015) which was acknowledged by museum curators and guides as adding to the perceived authenticity of the site despite the fact that no prisoners were incarcerated in its premises.

Gulag Museums as Performative and Educational Places of Visitation

The study contributes to the tourism literature by examining more specifically the roles authenticity and performance play in the management of the Gulag heritage being presented to visitors. The museum performative practices act as immersive and emotional tools to accentuate the 'dark' atmosphere of the epoch and induce a more impactful and participatory visitor experience. For a majority of stakeholders interviewed, the performances of the Gulag life showcased at Karlag and Alzhir

museums were enacted not only to ‘avoid repeating the same mistakes of the past’ but also as an educational and participatory instrument to inform and prevent any kind of political repression in the future.

The use of theatrical displays in ‘performing museums’ (Casey, 2003) and *narrative authenticity* (Walby & Piché, 2015) as a means to accentuate the ‘darker’ side of emotions are conveyed and staged during the recreated arrival in Alzhir camp. In case of the Alzhir museum, the theme of extreme pain and violence experienced by prisoners during the staged performances was not peripheral to the Gulag narrative, but rather reinforced to visitors as a central element of the tragedy. In doing this, the museums hope to create among local visitors a more personal connection to the tragedy, a form of *existential authenticity* (Walby & Piché, 2015; N. Wang, 1999) and sense of belonging to their shared Gulag heritage that allows visitors to reflect on the legacies of the Gulag in a more impactful way.

In the context of penal museums, the performative practices of the museums had a stronger effect on visitors in the understanding of the tragedy, beyond the museum effect which ‘relies on the mutually reinforcing relationship among objects, images, and space, altogether linking to a particular site’ (Welch, 2013, p. 143). As a tour operator explained:

The organisation of the cells and the music in the basement of the Karlag museum is exaggerated, but they used a *creative approach* that puts visitors immediately in the ‘atmosphere of the Gulag’. In my opinion, you immerse yourself in that environment and you feel more about what happened. And then, if visitors are more interested, they can go upstairs, look at the documents, find out how life in the Gulags really was, read some articles and develop their own opinion about it. So, it goes gradually. Therefore, I think you should combine both ‘visual effects’ and archive-based narratives as a means to convey a complete experience of the Gulag.

In both re-enactments of the Gulag life attempted in the Alzhir museum or the ‘Night in Karlag’ event, there is a strong rhetoric across the different stakeholders’ groups that the staged nature of the performances displayed on sites can equally act as agencies and testimonies of the Gulag tragedy. Interestingly, one of the curators of the Alzhir museum emphasised these theatrical performances were not aimed primarily at foreign visitors, but firstly at the local communities from the villages and towns surrounding Alzhir and Karlag museums. The staged events and performances organised both at Alzhir and Karlag museums are believed by government officials and tour operators to be more efficient for local visitors and schools as they helped understand ‘a glimpse of the Gulag tragedy’. The management of the museums intended to emotionally connect local communities and school children with aspects of the Gulag as ‘imagined’ by the curators to encourage visitors to further interact with the museum.

Historical Re-enactment of Atrocity and Meaningful Gulag Tourism Experiences

In the midst of contingency planning between various stakeholders involved in the funding, interpretation and management of heritage museums, authenticity at Kazakhstani Gulag museum and sites is often constructed in a dyadic way between the perspectives of museum curators and the ones of the government. The issues linked to the exploitation of victims and attracting foreign and local visitors can lead to adverse reactions from the local communities and the temptation for authorities to diminish the level of public involvement and funding in the dark heritage (Lennon & Foley, 1999; Seaton, 2009). As agencies and repositories of authentic artefacts of the Gulag legacy, some tour operators and specialists of the history of the Gulag suggested the need to offer a more diverse range of evidence in the performances about the life at the Gulag as means to (re)create narratives that incorporate testimonial from archives, local communities’ views as well as more institutional transparency. The rise of

authoritarianism in Kazakhstan in the creation, interpretation and utilisation of the Gulag heritage in museums by the government needs careful attention. One of the many challenges for local cities in Kazakhstan with a strong Gulag legacy is whose story is to be told and how it will be told in a non-exploitative manner, as well as what local policies and procedures will be in place when hosting visitors.

While the commodified versions of carceral staging found during the performances poses the delicate question of the extent to which museum curators can present meaningful aspects of the history of political repression while respecting the dignity of the victims, it is important to acknowledge this research is case specific and the generalization, transposition and applicability of the results of this study to other tourism destinations' contexts where the Gulag heritage is prevalent needs to be done with caution. The political and experiential nature of authenticity points to the need to analyse in more detail the key factors that affect the visitor experience in relation to Gulag performances across various countries of the former Soviet Union. A separate research agenda could consider how the performative Gulag tourism practices can be further developed and benefit from local community input as means to integrate local voices in the heritage conservation process (Xu, Wan, & Fan, 2014; Zhu, 2015) and governmental support as long-lasting heritage tourism and education sites. In particular the extent to which staged Gulag performances can be used in future awareness campaigns and education about the Gulags would warrant further investigation. How local governments are adapting to the dynamic roles of museums as heritage and educational sites to offer meaningful visitor experiences that are historically accurate while dealing with polarizing issues linked to Gulag heritage is an important question raised in this study. In that regard, the 'Night in the Gulag' events raised important questions about the appropriateness of the historical re-enactment of atrocity. The

practices of performance and interpretation involved in Gulag heritage tourism and ‘the production of a sense of realism and “authenticity”’ (Crang, 1996, p. 415) implies that contemporary Gulag museums are both adapting to the political agenda and the increasing demand of visitation for meaningful heritage experiences.

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